

# Conflict over convoys

Anglo-American logistics diplomacy in the  
Second World War

---

Kevin Smith

*Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1996

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1996

First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Smith, Kevin, 1962–

Conflict over convoys: Anglo-American logistics diplomacy in the Second  
World War / Kevin Smith.

p.            cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 49725 6

1. World War, 1939–1945 – Diplomatic history.    2. United States –  
Foreign relations – Great Britain.    3. Great Britain – Foreign  
relations – United States.    4. Merchant marine – United States.  
5. Strategy.    6. World War, 1939–1945 – Atlantic Ocean.    7. World  
War, 1939–1945 Equipment and supplies.    I. Title.

D753.S55    1996

940.53'22–dc20    95-30665    CIP

ISBN 0 521 49725 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52030 4 paperback

# Contents

---

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| <i>List of maps</i>  | page xi |
| <i>List of tables</i>  | xii     |
| <i>Preface</i>   | xiii    |
| <i>List of abbreviations and codewords</i>   | xv      |
| <br><i>Introduction</i>  | <br>1   |
| 1 “Not what it could or should be”: Britain’s shipping situation   | 5       |
| Shipping capacity assessments  | 6       |
| British shipbuilding in the thirties: a strategic industry collapses   | 13      |
| British shipbuilding at war  | 15      |
| 2 “Beyond our power without your help”: Britain’s Battle of the Atlantic   | 28      |
| The consequences of the fall of France   | 29      |
| Escort availabilities and priorities   | 30      |
| The aims and flaws of import programming   | 33      |
| Ships in port: the internal transport crisis of 1940–1941  | 48      |
| Ships under repair: a question of priorities   | 58      |
| 3 “But westward, look, the land is bright”: American shipping assistance from neutrality to belligerency, March 1941–November 1942                 | 64      |
| The Salter mission: the magnitude & limits of 1941 allocations   | 66      |
| Allied strategy and the external origins of the 1942–1943 British shipping crisis: US belligerency, strategic conflict, and the decision for TORCH | 72      |
| Allied logistics and the external origins of the 1942–1943 British shipping crisis: WSA ineptitude and American civil/military conflict            | 81      |
| British dependence escalates: the quest for a “solemn compact”   | 87      |
| 4 Roosevelt’s promise: “your requirements will be met”   | 97      |
| The Lyttelton mission: seeking presidential action   | 100     |
| Roosevelt’s flawed response  | 105     |
| Britain’s response: the limits of self-reliance  | 122     |

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
| 5 | The Casablanca Conference and its aftermath: a “most curious misunderstanding”   | 133 |
|   | The strategic and bureaucratic contexts for logistics diplomacy  | 135 |
|   | Somervell’s demand: British cargo shipping for BOLERO  | 139 |
|   | Leathers’ “commitment” to assist BOLERO  | 142 |
|   | Leathers’ “commitment”: imports crisis and TORCH reinforcements  | 151 |
|   | Civilian and military emergency in the Indian Ocean Area?  | 156 |
|   | Conflict over priorities: the Casablanca misunderstanding revealed and resolved  | 164 |
| 6 | Reaping the whirlwind: the perils of impending victory   | 177 |
|   | Ensuring access to American ships: seeking flag transfer   | 179 |
|   | Seeking access to American cargo: frozen cargo shortage  | 184 |
|   | Conflicting Anglo-American logistical and strategic responses to North Atlantic shipping surplus and North American cargo shortage | 191 |
|   | SEXTANT/EUREKA: confirming American strategic and logistical dominance   | 221 |
|   | Postscript and conclusions   | 226 |
|   | Appendices   | 240 |
|   | 1 Measuring merchant ship tonnage  | 240 |
|   | 2 The plight of British shipbuilding   | 241 |
|   | 3 Roosevelt’s letter to Churchill, 30 November 1942  | 242 |
|   | 4 Behrens’ interpretation of Roosevelt’s letter  | 244 |
|   | 5 Text of SABWA 156, the CSAB (W) cable of 19 January 1943 which relayed the WSA’s interpretation of Roosevelt’s promise           | 246 |
|   | 6 Roosevelt’s letter to Churchill, 28 May 1943   | 247 |
|   | <i>Tables</i>  | 249 |
|   | <i>Notes</i>   | 258 |
|   | <i>Bibliography</i>  | 304 |
|   | <i>Index</i>   | 312 |

## Maps

---

- |   |  |               |
|---|--|---------------|
| 1 | Britain's main West Coast ports                                  | <i>page</i> 8 |
| 2 | Areas of primary British responsibility in the Indian Ocean Area | 126           |

## Tables

---

|    |   |                 |
|----|---|-----------------|
| 1  | Total wartime British imports   | <i>page</i> 249 |
| 2  | Wartime Ministry of Food imports  | 249             |
| 3  | Wartime Ministry of Supply/Production imports   | 250             |
| 4  | Tonnage of British-controlled ships lost to submarines  | 250             |
| 5  | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, September 1939 – January 1941 | 251             |
| 6  | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, 1941                          | 251             |
| 7  | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant-shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, 1942                          | 252             |
| 8  | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, 1943                          | 252             |
| 9  | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, 1944                          | 253             |
| 10 | Monthly comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping tonnage under repair and lost to submarines, 1945                          | 253             |
| 11 | Cumulative comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping ton-months lost to repair and lost to submarines, 1939                  | 254             |
| 12 | Cumulative comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping ton-months lost to repair and lost to submarines, 1940                  | 254             |
| 13 | Cumulative comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping ton-months lost to repair and lost to submarines, 1941                  | 255             |
| 14 | Cumulative comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping ton-months lost to repair and lost to submarines, 1942                  | 255             |
| 15 | Cumulative comparison of British-controlled merchant shipping ton-months lost to repair and lost to submarines, January–June 1943     | 256             |
| 16 | Program for British meat (including frozen meat) imports from the United States   | 256             |
| 17 | British stocks of imported foods and raw materials during the import crisis of 1943   | 257             |

## Introduction

---

During the Second World War, Britain and the United States forged a remarkably successful partnership. It endured the severe strains imposed by the Second Front dispute, Franklin Roosevelt's erratic management style, and the tremendous growth in American might relative to British power. Scholars of wartime Anglo-American relations have established a balanced perspective that depicts contention amid collaboration. Within that framework, this book scrutinizes an important and heretofore overlooked element of the complex Anglo-American wartime alliance: logistics diplomacy. The "conflict over convoys" discussed herein refers only tangentially to anti-submarine warfare. Rather, logistics diplomacy was the Anglo-American battle for control of allocations of American-built merchant ships. Where would these convoys of merchant ships sail? Who should decide? How would the decision-making process and its results affect grand strategy, the cross-Channel attack, and Anglo-American relations? Evaluating this struggle provides an innovative approach for exploring key aspects of wartime Anglo-American relations. Logistics diplomacy sheds new light on the correlations between British industrial policy, British decline, the Battle of the Atlantic, Allied strategy for the Second Front, Roosevelt's leadership, and America's rise to global power. In particular, this perspective helps explain British exercise of disproportionate influence beyond Britain's means. It also helps show why that leverage gradually dissipated in 1943, culminating in American dominance in the Second Front decision.<sup>1</sup>

Four key facts dominated Anglo-American wartime logistics diplomacy. First, Britain depended upon American allocations of merchant ships to sustain its war effort. Britain still possessed the world's largest maritime fleet in 1940. Why then did Britain need American ships? Britain lacked enough merchant shipping capacity to import the quantities of vital foodstuffs and raw materials required to supply domestic needs and maintain military operations abroad. Britain built too few ships, sent them on too lengthy voyages, protected them poorly, and unloaded them slowly. Its low shipbuilding output did not keep pace

with losses. Nor could that production overcome Churchill's logistically imprudent commitment to reinforce British troops in Egypt in autumn 1940. Its antiquated port and internal transport infrastructure also hampered efforts to unload ships and turn them around quickly for outward bound voyages. British leaders responded slowly and ineffectively. Thus Britain became logistically dependent on American allocations of merchant ships to obtain supplies. Those supplies, in turn, could only be procured through generous Lend-Lease. In this light, Churchill's decision to fight on in 1940, heedless of consequences, gains added significance. Churchill had placed the British war effort and the British people at the mercy of American decisions regarding merchant shipbuilding output and allocations. Because merchant ships had to be the primary means of transport to enable the island-bound British and transatlantic Americans to concentrate their forces against Hitler, Britain's failure to maintain logistical independence threatened her with strategic dependence.

Secondly – and in stark contrast to the first point – Britain's political and military leadership was nevertheless determined to maintain strategic dominance. Though American belligerency transformed the strategic context of British pleas for shipping allocations, the British hoped to thwart American initiative on behalf of what they deemed a premature Second Front in France in 1942. Churchill and Roosevelt resolved the resulting stalemate with the invasion of North Africa (TORCH). TORCH promised fewer strategic and political risks, though the United States Army condemned it as too diversionary. But British determination to exercise strategic dominance amidst logistical dependence proved costly. For example, Americans and Britons alike overlooked TORCH's catastrophic impact upon a dangerously emaciated British civilian imports program. TORCH was logistically premature. It risked delaying future offensives by destabilizing British imports. Britain's logistical dependence upon the United States for its civilian needs (amid a global merchant shipping shortage) therefore influenced the 1942–1944 battle for the Second Front. This issue was dismissed too readily then and has not since been evaluated properly by reviewing the Second Front controversy in the context of civilian logistical needs. Certainly logistics—especially civilian logistics—could never be the sole determinant of military strategy. But military supply needs competed directly with civilian supply needs. Thus the two must be analyzed together. This book insists our appraisal of the Second Front controversy is incomplete unless the role of Anglo-American logistics diplomacy is reviewed.

This intersection between logistics and strategy points to the third fact. This book also examines the roles of American and British Cabinet-level



officials and bureaucrats, but Roosevelt was the key man. Britain's "logistics diplomats" quickly recognized that the American civilian shipping bureaucracy could neither make decisions nor enforce its will. They had to go to Roosevelt. The British did achieve some shipping allocations thereby, but their victory was only partial, for they were dependent upon Roosevelt's continued willingness to intervene and to do so effectively. He shrewdly exploited America's growing industrial might to retain full power of decision for himself on logistical and strategic issues, but his grasp of arcane essentials was no better than Churchill's. Also, he mishandled United States Army opposition to aiding Britain. He refused to tell them that he had given Britain ships. This action confused and frustrated United States Army Service Forces officers desperate for ships to sustain movement overseas, including Operation BOLERO (deployment of American troops to Britain prior to cross-channel attack). Thus when British logistics diplomats insisted on fulfillment of Roosevelt's prior promise of shipping aid, the contradiction between logistical dependence and the quest for strategic dominance was exposed. Thus Roosevelt's devious methods had imperiled Anglo-American logistics diplomacy, endangered the Allies' tenuous strategic compromise, and hindered the buildup for the Second Front. By accident or design, his dithering postponed effective resolution until American merchant shipping seemed able to support both British imports and BOLERO. Then he intervened once more in March 1943 to sustain British imports. But his methods inspired lasting Army bitterness toward the cunning British they considered to be responsible. That anger curtailed efforts to exploit Mediterranean offensives in autumn 1943 and even hampered the BOLERO buildup itself.

Fourthly, victory in the Battle of the Atlantic gradually exposed the full extent of the shift in power from Britain to the United States. That victory made possible the ensuing war-winning (and logistically expensive) offensives of 1944–1945. Thus it aided the emergence of a bipolar world in which Britain had to defer to American power. Why? It ended Britain's vulnerability to German interdiction of its supply lines without ending its logistical dependence on the United States. Until 1943, British logistics diplomats had nimbly leveraged logistical weakness into strength. They had demanded American ships to prevent a German victory at sea that would have been fatal to civilian and military logistical needs. But now victory in the Battle of the Atlantic had strategic and logistical consequences that gradually became clear during 1943. Though the British tried to utilize a temporary shipping glut in summer 1943 to transfer American ships from the crowded Atlantic to the Mediterranean (thereby intensifying American suspicions of Imperial objectives),

expanding global offensives thereafter threatened a new shipping shortage. But without a believable German threat, Britain became ever more vulnerable to American interdiction of British civilian supply on behalf of the Second Front. American power had triumphed. Americans would control British import levels with minimal British input. The climactic American triumph over British strategy at Teheran appropriately coincided with the American logistics diplomats' conclusive assertion of control over shipping allocations at Cairo in December 1943. There, Britain's efforts to dictate the Anglo-American logistical and strategic agenda simultaneously suffered an overdue collapse. By December 1943, therefore, the transfer of power in this arena had finally, grudgingly, been achieved. Anglo-American logistics negotiations henceforward consisted largely of administrative chores that were largely irrelevant to wider issues of strategy, diplomacy, and power.

Thus logistical overstretch, strategic disputes, Roosevelt's foibles, and growing American power interacted to shape the efforts of this extraordinarily successful coalition and alter the balance of power within it. Despite Churchill's belief in Anglo-American amity, Britain's failure to sustain enough merchant shipping capacity indeed proved detrimental to its maritime interests. As the war hastened Britain's fall from global power and accelerated America's rise, British officials' stubborn dual effort to exercise continued influence over the allocation of American merchant ships and to dominate Second Front strategy misfired. British logistics diplomacy could not serve indefinitely as an effective surrogate for power. British decline ensured eventual American dominance of Allied logistical and strategic decisions. This book tells how and why the British deferred but could not deny that eventuality.